

THE TIMELESSNESS OF OBLIGATION¹

Romans I, 14—"I am debtor, both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise."

ST. PAUL, university-bred, product of classical halls and heir to the best of the culture and traditions of the Hebraic-Graeco-Roman civilization, declared the motivating principle of the heart and mind of the educated, cultured individual of every age when he said: "I am debtor to all classes and to all generations." The recognition of obligation and of the fact that every privilege brings with it a commensurate responsibility, is the hall mark of culture; the Master defined that law in imperishable words: "Unto whom much has been given of him shall much be required."

In addressing this audience, and particularly this Rice Class of 1941 this morning, I am keenly aware that I speak to those to whom much has been given, and I freely assume that you are worthy of those gifts and that you gladly accept the responsibility of debtorhood.

On a monument in a Southern city is this inscription:

Of the past mindful
To the present faithful
For the future hopeful.

This inscription reminds us at once of the three dimensions within which the obligations of life lie: Past—Present—Future.

"Of the past—mindful!"

¹Baccalaureate sermon of the twenty-sixth annual commencement of the Rice Institute, delivered by A. Frank Smith, D.D., LL.D., President of the Council of Bishops of the Methodist Church, in the Court of the Chemistry Laboratories, at nine o'clock, Sunday morning, June 8, 1941.

Without knowledge of the past and respect for its achievements no person can properly evaluate the present or chart the future. We are debtors to the past for its civilizing and spiritualizing influences—for the long march which has brought man from the darkness of the closed mind and imprisoned spirit to the clear light of day, for the faithfulness of men with the long look, who were not confined by the provincial walls of their own day, but who, calm and unafraid, saw and labored for the coming of a better day, though often their lives paid forfeit to the blindness of their fellowmen. We are debtors today to the brave souls of all ages and races, and our hearts beat in unison with theirs, as we acknowledge our kinship.

The realization of our indebtedness to the past brings forcibly to mind the continuity of history, that "through the ages one increasing purpose runs." The march of life is from the lower to the higher, and the progress of human institutions is from the good to the better, to the best. We see this in the history of life below the level of human intelligence. Modern science has radically and completely changed our ideas about the beginnings of life. We no longer believe that the world, at the beginning of things, was stocked with living creatures whose shapes and forms were forever fixed. Science takes us back to "primeval slime," to protoplasm, to life in its most elementary form. From that humble beginning all the life upon our earth has come. And with the passing of the ages, the lower forms have been succeeded by higher in what Henry Drummond called the "ascent of life," till today the earth is populated with the most highly organized life it has ever known. The struggle, as one form gave way to another, was terrific, but always the higher emerged.

When man appeared upon the scene and established

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institutional life, the same process ensued—man passed from slavery to free service, from patriarchal judgment to impartial law, from absolute monarchy to government by the consent of the governed.

At the same time, in the field of religion, man passed from a tribal polytheism to a universal ethical monotheism, the basis of which is the fatherhood of God, and the inescapable corollary of which is the brotherhood of man. This progress of the race was not made in unbroken sequence. There were periods of decline, individuals and generations were lost, but the steady direction never changed. Humanity progresses as the tide—it flows and ebbs, only to flow again till the full tide sweeps in; but always the full tide comes.

This knowledge of the philosophy of history, of the divine plan for the universe, does two things for us today. In the first place, it enables us to put this war in its place. It is but an incident in humanity's struggle upward, more fearful and devastating than the world has ever before experienced, because of the powers of the machine, but still only an incident that cannot alter the plan of the universe. No tyrant has ever permanently retarded the progress of a people, and no moral and spiritual value, once gained, has ever been finally relinquished. The "stars in their courses" fight against the dictators, and their end is sure. Such knowledge gives us poise and stability and power in the midst of the clash of arms and the fall of empires.

In the next place, this knowledge of the inexorable workings of the plan of the universe faces us with the fact that this generation may very readily be caught in the ebb of progress, and be lost before humanity again catches step, and moves upward. To know that finally righteousness will triumph is a mighty source of strength, but it brings small comfort here and now, if we are to see our own day go backward.

This brings us to the second dimension of our threefold obligation—the present. “To the present—faithful.” It is easy to be pessimistic today, to speak of the decay of civilization, of the breakdown of character, of return to a dark age. But let us look at this day of ours before we draw such conclusions. We are living in the most remarkable day the world has ever seen. Man’s intellectual and scientific achievements have placed the resources of the universe at his disposal. The mechanical world is servant to man’s every desire; medicine has healed his body and extended his life expectancy; superb systems of education have opened his mind; social gains have freed woman, dignified labor, and uplifted life. There was never a finer, fuller, freer day in which to live than is today. Then why is the world in such fearful plight? For one reason alone—we have failed to make moral and spiritual gains commensurate with our intellectual and material advance. We have not learned to use in constructive fashion the powers we have developed. Future historians will record with amazement the fact that the first generation that possessed powers that were sufficient to have abolished want and ignorance, and to have made of this world a near paradise, used them instead to destroy itself.

We have brought the machine age to full flower, and certain choices are created thereby, upon the outcome of which hangs the destiny of this and succeeding generations. The measure of man’s powers for weal or for woe has been infinitely increased, and unless those powers are used in constructive fashion, they will inevitably be used destructively. You have but to read today’s papers to realize that fact. Furthermore, time and space have been annihilated, the world has become a neighborhood, isolation is a figment of the mind, and in a neighborhood men must have the moral

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character to fit into a community pattern, to sacrifice personal rights for the welfare of the whole, or to expect to be bullied and tyrannized by those who refuse to be good neighbors. In a word, we find ourselves in a day when we must rise to moral and spiritual heights not yet envisioned, or be lost.

If the rights of men be secondary, if mere triumph of mind and matter is the goal, the totalitarians are dead right; racial dominance, muzzled speech and press, throttled minds, imprisoned souls, the psychology of terror, complete tyranny through force, is the normal course. We have no quarrel with such methods if the machine be god, and our course is plain; viz., to beat them at their own game.

But you cry out at such a thought; you were not made for this, and in such a reaction you reveal the divinity within you, and come face to face with the only alternative, which is a conception of life based upon the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the sacredness of personality. And I say to you with all the conviction I can summon: no man can make the high choices this day demands in his own strength alone. The wisdom of God must illumine his mind, and the grace of God must strengthen his resolves in a very personal way. His must be a regenerated personality if he would hope to live acceptably. To be faithful to the present is to dedicate yourselves to this alternative. Immediate conditions may demand that you die that these ideals may be preserved; but you will not have died in vain. There are values worth fighting and dying for, and there are things far worse than death.

When this war shall have ended, as end it must, the rebuilding of a world will be upon us. In that rebuilding, whatever the problems, the solutions will increasingly lie in the moral and spiritual realm. Let me suggest a few of those

problems: a new international order, in which nations will respect one another because of mutual integrity, and not fear one another because of arms; the abolishing of unemployment, the end of racial domination, the end of economic exploitation of the underprivileged, and of natural resources, the proper use of leisure; and so I might continue. But you see at once that every one of these problems calls for adjustment in the spiritual realm, for justice, faith, cooperation, and a strength of character that is supreme.

Upon this Class of 1941 of the Rice Institute, and their fellows all over this land, rests the imperative of this supreme choice, that recognizes that they may live like gods, or be damned as beasts; that they have the powers at their disposal to make of the world an Eden or to reduce it to a shambles; that, privileged as they are, the world has a right to expect them to take the lead.

And now I take you back to our inscription, "For the future—hopeful!" The way will be long and hard, no person living today is likely to see a return of the lush plenty of the 'twenties, but I unhesitatingly look to the future with hope because I have looked into the eyes of the youth of this generation, and I have caught their heart beat. They are the best informed and best trained generation that ever entered life, and I have no doubt whatsoever but that they have the character to match that information and training.

For my generation, I pledge to those who are now taking up the battle, our faith and our undiminished cooperation so long as we live, to make of this a better world. No generation was ever more vigorously condemned for its failures, but I declare to you that the heart of the older generation is sound. We dreamed our dreams of a better world as we stood upon the threshold of life, and the dream is ours still, and in its radiance we shall press hopefully on

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to the end. One recalls the words of Browning, in *Paracelsus*:

I remember well
One journey, how I feared the track was missed,
So long the city I desired to reach
Lay hid; when suddenly its spires afar
Flashed through the circling clouds; you may conceive
My transport. Soon the vapours closed again,
But I had seen the city, and one such glance
No darkness could obscure: nor shall the present—
A few dull hours, a passing shame or two,
Destroy the vivid memories of the past.
I will fight the battle out; a little spent
Perhaps, but still an able combatant.

As you join forces with us, our hopes rise, and again we look for the city with eager eyes. You have caught the vision of a warless world, of a just economic order, of a federation of man. You have the means to realize this vision, and the character to use those means well, by God's help. As you go—I bid you Godspeed.

For we are afar with the dawning
And the suns that are not yet high,
And out of the infinite morning
Intrepid you hear us cry—
How, spite of human scorning,
Once more God's future draws nigh.

A. FRANK SMITH.